

HISTORY

BY

JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON

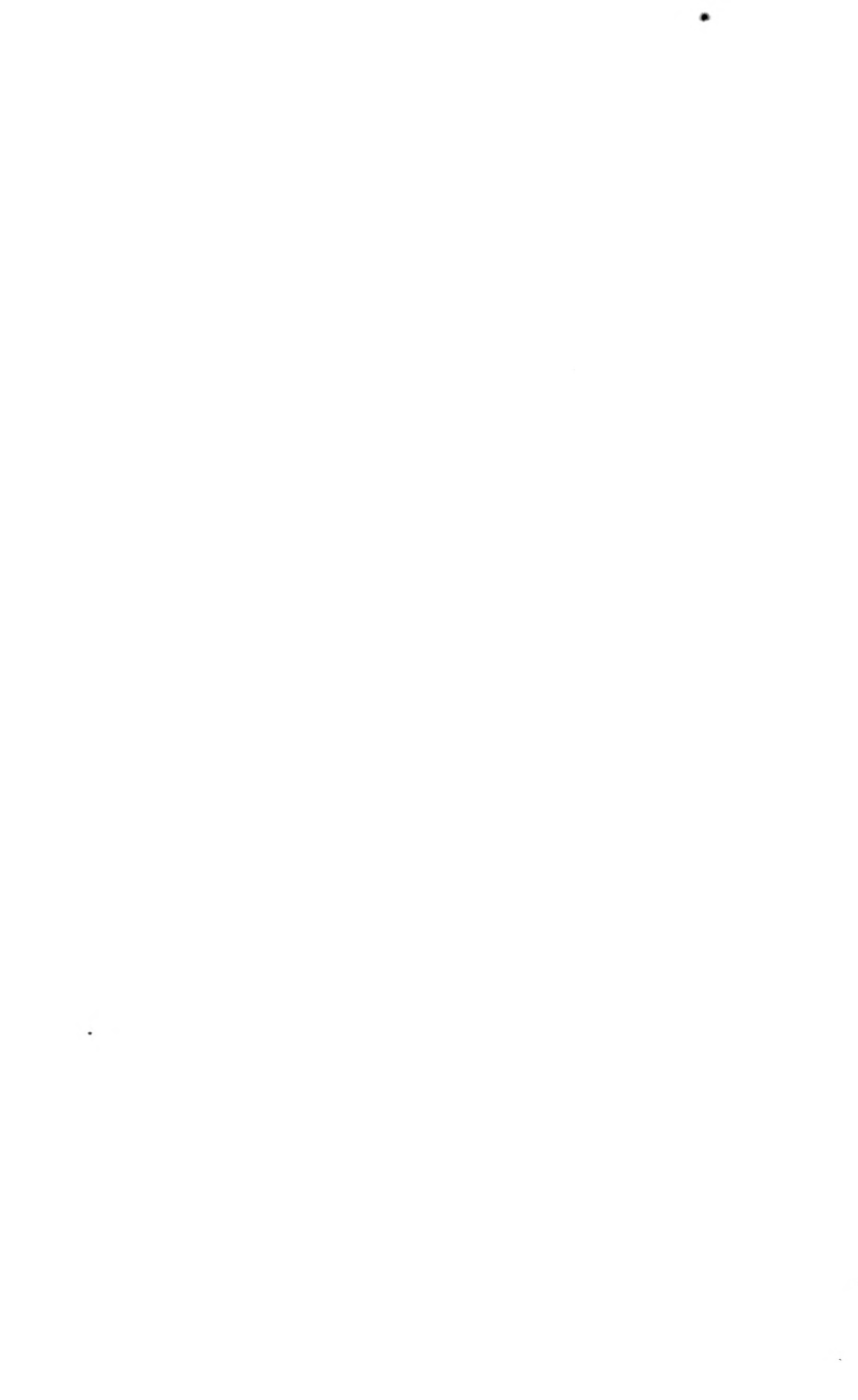
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

New York

THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

1908





HISTORY

A LECTURE DELIVERED AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE SERIES ON SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY AND ART
JANUARY 15, 1908



HISTORY

BY

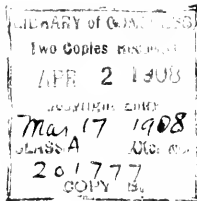
JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

New York

THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

1908



COPYRIGHT, 1908,
By THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Set up, and published March, 1908.



HISTORY

HISTORY itself has a long history, extending, in Europe, from Herodotus and Thucydides to the most recent discussions in the current numbers of the "Historische Zeitschrift" and the "Moyen Âge." The changes which have from time to time overtaken it during two thousand years and more, have left indelible impressions which can alone explain the peculiar plight in which this particular branch of knowledge finds itself to-day, with all its inconsistencies, incongruities and vagueness of purpose. As we have listened to the clear and confident paeans of praise and thanksgiving which my predecessors in this course have raised, week after week, it has become clear to me that "blessed is the science without a history." Chemistry, Astronomy, Zoology, Physiology may have had a few errors of youth to live down, but they found themselves before their sensibilities had been permanently perverted by unfortunate associations. With History it is different. It seems never to lose any habits once formed. It adds new ambitions while retaining its old ones, discredited though they may be.

The story teller was probably the first to discover History; at any rate it has been unmistakably epic from the beginning. Its purpose has usually been to tell a tale rather than to contribute to a well organized body of science.

tific truth. Indeed we shall not be far astray if we view History, as it has existed through the ages, even down to our own day, as a branch of general literature the object of which has been to present past events in an artistic manner, in order to gratify a natural curiosity in regard to the achievements and fate of conspicuous persons, the rise and decay of monarchies, and the signal commotions and disasters which have repeatedly afflicted humanity. Although the persistence of this primitive notion of history is so obvious as scarcely to demand illustration, it is interesting to note that as late as 1820, Daunou, a reputable French historian of his time, in a course of lectures upon the pursuit of history delivered at the Collège de France, declares that the master-pieces of epic poetry should claim the first attention of the would-be-historian, since it is the poets who have created the art of narrative. Next, from the modern novel, the student may learn, Daunou continues, "the method of giving an artistic pose to persons and events, of distributing details, of skilfully carrying on the thread of the narrative, of interrupting it, of resuming it, of sustaining the attention and provoking the curiosity of the reader."

After the poets and novels, the works of standard historians should be read with a view to surprising the secrets of their style—Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, and Plutarch; Caesar, Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus; and, among the moderns, Macchiavelli, Guicciardini, Giannone, Hume, Robertson, Gibbon, and Voltaire. When the foundations of an elegant literary style are firmly established the student may re-read the standard treatises with attention to the matter rather than the form, for, as even the judicious Daunou concedes, before writing history "it is evidently necessary to know it." Both Daunou's program and his list of names—unquestionably the most distinguished among historians throughout the centuries—tes-

tify to the strength of literary traditions among historical writers.

Yet a formal distinction at least has of course always been made between history and other branches of literature. This is emphasized by Polybius, writing in the second century before Christ. "Surely," he says, "an historian's object should be not to amaze his readers by a series of thrilling anecdotes, nor should he aim to produce speeches which *might* have been delivered, nor to study dramatic propriety in detail, like a writer of tragedy. On the contrary, his function is above all to record with fidelity what was actually said or done, no matter how commonplace it may be."

These warnings of Polybius were, however, commonly neglected by the ancient historian, whose object was to interest his readers in the great men and striking events of the past, or to prepare him for public life by describing and analyzing the policy of former statesmen and generals, or to teach him to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of fortune by recalling the calamities of others. It is clear that these ends of amusing, instructing or edifying were to be attained mainly by literary skill rather than by painful historical research.

To Thucydides, Polybius and Tacitus, history appeared to be purely human and secular. Its significance was confined to this world. To them any reflections upon the influence of the gods or upon providence would have seemed quite out of place. But with the advent of Christianity the past began to take on a religious and theological meaning. The greatest of all the church fathers, St. Augustine, appealed to history to substantiate and illustrate his theory of the two cities, one heavenly and one earthly; and his immortal work deeply affected the thought of Europe for centuries. Still more influential in determining the interpretation of history was a little manual of universal history

written, at Augustine's suggestion, by Orosius, one of his ardent disciples. This is directed against their pagan contemporaries, who maintained that their age was accursed above all others, owing to the desertion of the ancient gods.

The object of Orosius was to show that, on the contrary, a veritable carnival of death had preceded the appearance of Christianity. Accordingly, as he tells us, he brought together, in the compass of a single volume, all the examples he could find in the annals of the past "of the most signal horrors of war, pestilence and famine, of the fearful devastations of earthquakes and inundations, the destruction wrought by fiery eruptions, by lightning and hail, and the awful misery due to crime." History thus became for Orosius, and for his innumerable readers in succeeding centuries, the story of God's punishment of sin and the curse which man's original transgression had brought upon the whole earth.

But we need not expose ourselves to the hot and withering blasts of Orosius's rhetoric in order to realize the salient contrast between his conception of history's purpose and usefulness and that of the classical Greek and Roman writers. In the old days the danger had been that Clio would fall into the way of aping her sisters, poetry and the drama, and of borrowing their finery. Now, she permitted herself to be led away blindfolded by theology, which was for so long to be the potent rival of literature. The Greek historians and the greatest of the Roman, Tacitus, were forgotten in the Middle Ages; so the convenient pamphlet of Orosius served to distort Europe's vision of the past for a thousand years until Thucydides and Polybius came once more within its ken. But any influence that they exercised in reviving ancient ideals of historiography was far more than offset by the religious perturbations due to the Protestant Revolt.

Luther discovered that history could be appealed to to

support his attack upon what he called the "*Teufels Nest zu Rom.*" And not long after his death a group of Protestants compiled a vast history of the church—"The Magdeburg Centuries," as it was called—in which they sought to prove the diabolical origin of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Baronius replied in twelve folio volumes, written, as he trusted, under the direct auspices of the Virgin Mary, in which he set forth "the calamities divinely sent for the punishment of those who have dared to oppose in their arrogance, or conspire against, the true church of God." For three centuries each party continued to suborn history in its own interest, and one must still, to-day, allow for religious bias in important fields of historical research. Yet in spite of all its bitterness and blindness, religious controversies have stimulated much scholarly investigation in modern times, and we should be much poorer if certain works of a distinctly partisan character had never been written,—for example, Raynaldus' continuation of Baronius and, in our own days, Janssen's "History of the German People," and Pastor's "History of the Popes."

To the authors of the "Magdeburg Centuries" and to Cardinal Baronius the great, obvious, determining historical forces were God and the devil. Our conception of God, as well as our ideas of history, have been changing, however, since the sixteenth century and it is rare now to find a historian who possesses the old confidence in his ability to penetrate God's counsels and trace his dispensations in detail. As for the devil few events can longer be ascribed to him with perfect assurance.

The reversion to Greek standards of historical composition represented by Macchiavelli and Guicciardini in the early sixteenth century became pronounced in the eighteenth. Gibbon, Voltaire, Hume, Robertson and others successfully re-secularized history and strove to give their

narratives of political events the ancient elegance of form. Moreover, since the middle of the eighteenth century, new interests other than the more primitive literary, political, military, moral and theological, have been developing. These have exercised a remarkable influence upon historical research, radically altering its spirit and aims and broadening its scope. To take a single example, Montesquieu's "Spirit of Laws"—first published in 1748—reviews the past with the purpose of establishing a purely scientific proposition, namely, the relativity of all human institutions, social, political, educational, economic, legal and military. The discussions attending the drafting of the first French constitution (1789–1791) served to provoke a study of constitutional history which has never since flagged.

In the nineteenth century people continued, as they always had done, to see their own particular interests reflected in the dim mirror of the past. One might know nothing of the modern varieties of historical interpretation and yet be confident that there would be one discoverable corresponding to each of the main currents of thought and endeavor. Now among the most unmistakable phenomena of the nineteenth century were the rise of the spirit of nationality, the struggle for constitutional government, the enthusiasm for natural science, the doctrine of evolution, the industrial revolution and the impetus which this has given to economic theory and the discussion of economic reform. History was ready to serve all the causes here enumerated, as well as some others of which there is no time to speak.

Early in the nineteenth century the cosmopolitan sentiments so conspicuous at the opening of the French Revolution began to give way to the spirit of nationality which was awaking in the various European states, especially Germany. This almost immediately showed itself in a

new and highly characteristic interpretation of history. While I make no pretensions to understanding Hegel I am going to repeat a few things he said in his lectures on the philosophy of history, first delivered in Berlin in the winter of 1822–1823, for many people thought they did understand him and were deeply affected by his teachings. As he looked back over the restless mutations of individuals and peoples, existing for a time and then vanishing, he was confident that he could trace the World-Spirit striving for consciousness and then for freedom, its essential nature. This Spirit assumes successive forms which it successively transcends. These forms appear in the peculiar national genius of historic peoples. The spirit of a particular people having strictly defined characteristics “erects itself,” Hegel explains, “into an objective world that exists and persists in a particular form of religious worship, customs, constitution, and political laws,—in short, in the whole complex of its institutions and in the events and transactions that make up its history.” The Persians, Hegel held, were the first world-historical people, for was it not in Persia that Spirit first began to attain an “unlimited immanence of subjectivity?” The Greek character was “individuality conditioned by beauty.” “Subjective inwardness” was the general principle of the Roman world.

Ingenious as this may be, it would hardly have formed the basis of a new gospel of national freedom and deeply affected historical interpretation, had it not been for Hegel’s extraordinary discovery that it was his own dear German nation in which it had pleased the *Weltgeist* to assume its highest form. “The German Spirit is the Spirit of the new world,” Hegel proclaims; “its aim is the realization of absolute truth, as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom . . . The destiny of the German peoples is to be the bearers of the Christian principle.” The supreme rôle assigned to his countrymen by Hegel filled them with justi-

fiable pride. And was not his assumption amply borne out by the glories of *Deutschthum* in the Middle Ages, which the Romanticists were singing; and, much more recently, by the successful expulsion of the French tyrant only a few years before? That all this should combine to give a distinct national and patriotic trend to historic research and writing was inevitable. The great collection of the sources for the German Middle Ages,—the “*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*”—which was to become a model for other nations, began to be issued in 1826 and for the first time the Germans became the leaders in the historical field as in so many others. Ranke, Dahn, Giesebrecht, Waitz, Droysen and dozens of others who began to devote themselves to German history, were all filled with a warm patriotism and enthusiasm very different from the cosmopolitan spirit of the preceding century. Throughout Europe history tended to become distinctly national, and an extraordinary impetus was given to the publication of vast collections of material. It is, however, hardly necessary to point out that national enthusiasm, even that of a German, has its dangers. It fostered some singular misapprehensions which Fustel de Coulanges and other more recent writers have rectified. Moreover we in America have allowed ourselves to be somewhat imposed upon by German erudition and have got into the habit of giving more attention to the Middle Ages and to German history than is really justified by their relative importance. To-day we surely have more to learn from France than Germany.

It was natural that this national spirit and the political and constitutional questions of the nineteenth century should serve to perpetuate the older interest in political history. This is the most ancient, most obvious and easiest kind of history, for the policy of kings, the laws they issued and the wars they fought have always been the matters which were likeliest to be recorded. Then the State is the

most imposing and important of man's social creations and many historians have felt that what was best worth knowing in the past could be directly or indirectly associated with its history. Ranke, Droysen, Maurenbrecher, Freeman and many others deemed political history to be history *par excellence*. In the historical seminar rooms of Johns Hopkins University Freeman's words, "History is past politics," are inscribed over the entrance.

During the past thirty years a rather bitter conflict has, however, been waged in Germany between the representatives of the political conception of history and those who clamored for the recognition of *Kulturgeschichte* as entitled to an equal if not distinctly superior rank. Now *Kulturgeschichte* includes such matters as have hitherto been generally passed over in the routine of historical writing and instruction. The fundamental and enduring intellectual, educational, artistic, and even economic conditions have been neglected,—so the advocates of *Kulturgeschichte* complain,—in favor of fleeting political and military events, court intrigues and futile diplomatic negotiations. While the aims of the *Kulturhistoriker* are necessarily rather vague at first, and his operations have not the precision of the scholarship represented in the narrower, traditional school, the justice of his contentions is too obvious to be questioned. We have an inalienable right to study anything we please in the past. If the appearance and effects of Peter Lombard's "Sentences" appeals to us rather than the contemporaneous doings of the emperor Lothaire, it is not difficult to make out a case in favor of the theologian's importance. And surely the development of the German language in the eleventh and twelfth century is as important as the struggle between Welf and Hohenstaufen.

We have now reviewed the chief motives which appear to have influenced the greater number of historical writers

from Thucydides to Macaulay and Ranke. They all agreed in examining more or less conscientiously and critically the records of past events and conditions with a view of amusing, edifying or comforting the reader. But none of the interests of which I have so far spoken can be regarded as scientific. To scan the past with the hope of discovering recipes for the making of statesmen and warriors, of discrediting the pagan gods, of showing that Catholic or Protestant is right, of exhibiting the stages of self-realization of the *Weltgeist*, or demonstrating that Liberty emerged from the forests of Germany never to return thither,—none of these motives are scientific although they may go hand in hand with much sound scholarship. But by the middle of the nineteenth century the muse of history, *semper mutabile*, began to fall under the potent spell of natural science. She was no longer satisfied to celebrate the deeds of heroes and nations with the lyre and shrill flute on the breeze-swept slopes of Helicon; she no longer durst attempt to vindicate the ways of God to man. She had already come to recognize that she was ill-prepared for her undertakings and had begun to spend her mornings in the library, collating manuscripts and making out lists of variant readings. She aspired to do even more and began to talk of raising her chaotic mass of information to the rank of a science.

But history, in order to become scientific, had first to become historical. Singularly enough what we now regard as the strictly historical interest was almost missed by historians before the nineteenth century. They narrated such past events as they believed would interest the reader; they commented on these with a view of instructing him, fortifying his virtue or patriotism or staying his faith in God. In a way it was not so very important whether they took pains to verify their facts or not. Indeed, the exact truth, when we are lucky enough to get a glimpse of

it, is rarely so picturesque or so edifying as what might have been. Still they did take some pains to find out how things really were—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*, to use Ranke's famous dictum. To this extent they were scientific, although their motives were mainly literary, moral or religious. They did not, however, in general try to determine how things had come about—*wie es eigentlich geworden*. History thus remained for two or three thousand years a record of past events, and this definition satisfies the thoughtless still. But it is one thing to describe what once was; it is quite another to attempt to determine how it came about.

There is not time on this occasion to attempt to trace the causes and gradual development of this genetic interest.¹ The main reason for its present strength lies probably in our modern lively consciousness of the reality and inevitability of change, examples of which are continually forcing themselves upon our attention. The Greek historians had little or no background for their narratives. It is amazing to note the contemptuous manner in which Thucydides rejects all accounts of even the immediately preceding generation, as mere uncertain traditions. Polybius set himself the task of tracing the gradual extension of the Roman dominion, but there is no indication that he had any clear idea of the continuity of history. In the Middle Ages there was undoubtedly a notion that the earth was the scene of a divine drama which was to culminate in the definitive separation of the wheat from the tares; but this supernatural unity of history was not scientific but theological. In earthly matters the mediaeval man could hardly have understood the meaning of the word, anachronism; the painters of the Renaissance did not hesitate to place a crucifix over the manger of the divine infant and there was nothing incongruous in this to their contemporaries.

Not until the eighteenth century did the possibility of

indefinite human progress become the exhilarating doctrine of reformers, a class which had previously attacked existing abuses in the name of the "good old times." No discovery could be more momentous and fundamental than that reform should seek its sanction in the future, not in the past; in advance, not in reaction. It became clearer and clearer that the world *did* change, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the continuity of history began to be accepted by the more thoughtful students of the past and began to affect as never before their motives and methods of research.

The doctrine of the continuity of history is based upon the observed fact that every human institution, every generally accepted idea, every important invention, is but the summation of long lines of progress, reaching back as far as we have the patience or means to follow them. The jury, the drama, the gatling gun, the papacy, the letter "s," the doctrine of transubstantiation, each owes its present form to antecedents which can be scientifically traced. But no human interest is isolated from innumerable concurrent interests and conditioning circumstances. This brings us to the broader conception of the continuity of change which is attributable to the complexity of men's affairs. A somewhat abrupt change may take place in some single institution or habit but a sudden general change is almost inconceivable. An individual may, through some modification of his environment, through bereavement of malignant disease, be quickly and fundamentally metamorphosed, but even such cases are rare. If all the habits and interests of the individual are considered it will be found that only in the most exceptional cases are any great number of these altered in the twinkling of an eye. And society is infinitely more conservative than the individual, for reasons which need not be reviewed here. Now—and this cannot be too strongly emphasized—the continuity of history is a sci-

entific truth, the attempt to trace the slow process of change is a scientific problem, and one of the most fascinating in its nature. It is the discovery and application of this law which has served to differentiate history from literature and morals and raise it in one sense to the dignity of a science.

Earlier lectures in this course have made plain the tremendous importance of the developmental treatment in nearly all the branches of natural science. It is equally new and equally revolutionary in its application to humanity. The older historians had little inclination to describe familiar conditions and the common routine of everyday life. It was the startling and exceptional that caught their attention and which they found recorded in the sources upon which they depended. They were like a geologist who should deal only with earthquakes and volcanoes, or better still, a zoologist who should have no use for any thing smaller than an elephant or less picturesque in its habits than a phoenix or a basilisk. An appreciation of the overwhelming significance of the small, the common and the obscure establishes the brotherhood of all scientific workers whatever their fields of activity.

History has so long been concealed behind a mask which has served either to enhance the charm of her homely features beyond all recognition, or to render her familiar and commonplace form monstrous and repulsive, that it is little wonder that historians only slowly adjust themselves to the new point of view. The first and greatest contribution to the scientific study of history came from an unexpected source and was again a clear reflection of the dominant practical exigencies of the time. Perhaps Buckle was right when he declared that the historians have on the whole been inferior in point of intellect to thinkers in other fields. At any rate it was a philosopher, economist and reformer, not a professional student of history, who suggested a wholly

new and wonderful series of questions which the historian might properly ask about the past, and moreover furnished him with a scientific explanation of many matters hitherto ill-understood. I mean Karl Marx.

In a singular pamphlet called "The Holy Family," written in 1845, Marx denounced those who discover the birthplace of history in the shifting clouds of heaven instead of in the hard, daily work on earth. He maintained that the only sound and ever valid general explanation of the past was economic. The history of society depends, he held, upon the methods by which its members produce their means of support and exchange the products of industry among themselves. The methods of production and transportation determine the methods of exchange, the distribution of products, the division of society into classes, the relations of the several classes, the existence of the State, the character of its laws, and of all that it means for mankind. We are not concerned here with the complicated genesis of this idea, nor with the precise degree of originality to be attributed to Marx's presentation of it. Nor is there time to explain the manner in which Marx's theory was misused by himself and his followers. Few, if any, historians would agree that everything can be explained economically, as many of the socialists and some economists of good standing would have us believe. But in the sobered and chastened form in which most economists now receive the doctrine, it serves to explain far more of the phenomena of the past than any other single explanation ever offered. It is the economist who has opened up the most fruitful new fields of research by emphasizing the importance of the enduring but often inconspicuous factors which almost entirely escaped historians before the middle of the nineteenth century. I am inclined to think that Jaurès, one of the leaders of the French socialists, has written what is, on the

whole, the most illuminating history of the French Revolution. Moreover he has induced the French government to appoint a commission to investigate and edit the chief sources for the economic history of that great movement. No one can glance at the volumes that have recently been appearing in that series without realizing the fundamental character of the material they contain as compared with similar series issued under the influence of the older canons of importance.

It was inevitable that attempts would be made to reduce history to a science by reconstructing it upon the lines suggested by the natural sciences. The most celebrated instance of this is Buckle's uncompleted "History of Civilization," the first volume of which appeared in 1857. It seemed to him that while the historical material which had been collected, when looked at in the aggregate, had "a rich and imposing appearance," the real problem of the historian had hardly been suspected, let alone solved. "For all the higher purposes of human thought," he declares, "history is still miserably deficient, and presents that confused and anarchical appearance natural to a subject of which the laws are unknown and even the foundations unsettled." He accordingly hoped, he tells us, to "accomplish for the history of man something equivalent, or at all events analogous, to what has been effected by other inquirers for the different branches of natural science. In regard to nature, events apparently the most irregular and capricious have been explained, and have been shown to be in accordance with certain fixed and universal laws. This has been done because men of ability, and, above all, men of patient, untiring thought, have studied natural events with the view of discovering their regularity; and if human events were subjected to a similar treatment, we have every right to expect similar results." Buckle proposed to discover the laws, physical and mental, which govern the workings of mankind and then trace their operations in the general de-

velopment of civilization. Unlike Marx, Buckle believed that physical laws tended to become well-nigh inoperative in so highly developed a civilization as that of Europe and that, consequently, the moral and intellectual laws should constitute the main object of the historian's search.

Fifty years have elapsed since Buckle's book appeared, and I know of no historian who would venture to maintain that we had made any considerable advance toward the goal he set for himself. A systematic prosecution of the various branches of social science, especially political economy and anthropology, perhaps of psychology,—if that be a social science—has served to explain some things, but history must always remain, from the standpoint of the astronomer, physicist or chemist, a highly inexact and fragmentary body of knowledge. This is due mainly to the fact that it concerns itself with man, his devious ways and wandering desires, which it seems hopeless at present to bring within the compass of clearly defined laws of any kind. Then our historical knowledge must forever rest upon scattered and highly precarious data, the truth of which we have no means of testing. This melancholy fact is not so well known as it should be, for in writing for the public even conscientious scholars have hitherto found themselves suppressing their doubts and uncertainties until they were scarcely aware that they ever had them; concealing their pitiful ignorance and yielding to the temptation to ignore yawning gulfs at whose brink History must halt even though Literature can bridge them with ease. I should like to dwell for a moment on this painful theme of our ineluctable ignorance over which Literature has been wont to throw a kindly veil. For it is to a considerable extent an exaggerated notion of the extent of our knowledge that has encouraged the reckless ventures of those who have dreamed of reducing history to an exact science.

Fifty years ago it was generally believed that we knew

something about man from the very first. Of his abrupt appearance on the freshly created earth and his early conduct, there appeared to be a brief but exceptionally authoritative account. Now we are beginning to recognize the immense antiquity of man. There are paleolithic implements which there is some reason for supposing may have been made a hundred and fifty thousand years ago; the eolithic remains recently discovered may perhaps antedate the paleolithic by an equally long period. Mere guesses and impressions, of course, this assignment of millennia, which appear to have been preceded by some hundreds of thousands of years during which an animal was developing with "a relatively enormous brain case, a skilful hand and an inveterate tendency to throw stones, flourish sticks" and, in general, as Ray Lankester expresses it, "to defeat aggression and satisfy his natural appetites by the use of his wits rather than by strength alone." There may still be historians who would argue that all this has nothing to do with history;—that it is "prehistoric." But "prehistoric" is a word that must go the way of "preadamite," which we used to hear. They both indicate a suspicion that we are in some way gaining illicit information about what happened before the foot lights were turned on and the curtain rose on the great human drama. Of the so-called "prehistoric" period we of course know as yet very little indeed, but the bare fact that there was such a period constitutes in itself the most momentous of historical discoveries. The earliest, somewhat abundant, traces of mankind can hardly be placed earlier than six thousand years ago. They indicate, however, a very elaborate and advanced civilization and it is quite gratuitous to assume that they represent the first occasions on which man rose to such a stage of culture. Even if they do, the wonderful tale of how the conditions of which we find hints in Babylonia, Egypt and Crete came about is lost.

Let us suppose that there has been something worth saying about the deeds and progress of mankind during the past three hundred thousand years at least; let us suppose that we were fortunate enough to have the merest outline of such changes as have overtaken our race during that period, and that a single page were devoted to each thousand years. Of the three hundred pages of our little manual the closing six or seven only would be allotted to the whole period for which records, in the ordinary sense of the word, exist, even in the scantiest and most fragmentary form. Or, to take another illustration, let us imagine history under the semblance of a vast lake into whose rather turbid depths we eagerly peer. We have reason to think it at least twenty-five feet deep, perhaps fifty or a hundred; we detect the very scantiest remains of life, *rara et disjecta*, four or five feet beneath the surface, six or seven inches down these are abundant, but at that depth we detect, so to speak, no movements of animate things, which are scarcely perceptible below three or four inches. If we are frank with ourselves we shall realize that we can have no clear and adequate notion of anything happening more than an inch,—indeed, scarce more than half an inch below the surface.

From this point of view the historian's gaze, instead of sweeping back into remote ages when the earth was young, seems now to be confined to his own epoch, Rameses the Great, Tiglath-Pileser and Solomon appear practically coeval with Caesar, Constantine, Charlemagne, St. Louis, Charles V, and Victoria; Bacon, Newton, and Darwin are but the younger contemporaries of Thales, Plato, and Aristotle. Let those pause who attempt to determine the laws of human progress or decay. It is like trying to determine by observing the conduct of a man of forty for a month, whether he be developing or not. Anything approaching a record of events does not reach back for more than three

thousand years and even this remains shockingly imperfect and unreliable for more than two millenniums. We have a few, often highly fragmentary, literary histories covering Greek and Roman times, also a good many inscriptions and some important archeological remains; but these leave us in the dark upon many vital matters. The sources for the Roman Empire are so very bad that Mommsen refused to attempt to write its history. Only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries do the mediaeval annals and chronicles begin to be supplemented by miscellaneous documents which bring us more directly into contact with the life of the time.

Yet the reader of history must often get the impression that the sources of our knowledge are, so to speak, of a uniform volume and depth, at least for the last two or three thousand years. When he beholds a voluminous account of the early Church, or of the Roman Empire, or observes Dahn's or Hodgkin's many stately volumes on the Barbarian invasions, he is to be pardoned for assuming that the writers have spent years in painfully condensing and giving literary form to the abundant material which they have turned up in the course of their prolonged researches. Too few suspect that it has been the business of the historian in the past not to condense but on the contrary skilfully to inflate his thin film of knowledge until the bubble should reach such proportions that its bright hues would attract the attention and elicit the admiration of even the most careless observer. One volume of Hodgkin's rather old fashioned "Italy and her Invaders," had the scanty material been judiciously compressed, might have held all that we can be said to even half-know about the matters to which the author has seen fit to devote eight volumes.

But pray do not jump to the conclusion that the historical writer is a sinner above all men. In the first place, it should never be forgotten that he is by long tradition a

man of letters, and that that is not, after all, such a bad thing to be. In the second place he experiences the same strong temptation that everyone else does to accept, at their face value, the plausible statements which he finds, unless they conflict with other accounts of the same events or appear to be inherently improbable. Lastly he is, like his fellow primates, the victim of what Nietzsche has called "dream logic." I am sure that we do not reckon constantly enough with this inveterate tendency of even a highly cultivated mind instinctively to elaborate and amplify mere hints and suggestions into complete and vivid pictures.

To take an illustration of Nietzsche's, the vague feeling, as we lie in bed, that the soles of our feet are free from the usual pressure to which we are accustomed in our waking hours demands an explanation. Our dream explanation is that we must be flying. Not satisfied to leave its work half done, dream logic fabricates a room or landscape in which we make our aerial experiments. Moreover just as we are going to sleep or awaking we can often actually observe how a flash of light, such as sometimes appears on the retina of our closed eyes, will be involuntarily interpreted as a vision of some human figure or other object, clear as a stereopticon slide. Now anyone can demonstrate to himself that neither dream logic nor the "mind's-eye faculty," as it has been called, desert us when we are awake. Indeed they may well be, as Nietzsche suspects, a portion of the inheritance bequeathed to us, along with some other inconveniences, by our brutish forebears. At any rate they are forms of aberration against which the historian, with his literary traditions, needs specially to be on his guard. There are rumors that even the student of natural science sometimes keeps his mind's eye too wide open, but he is by no means so likely as the historian to be misled by dream logic. This is not to be ascribed necessarily to the superior self-restraint of the scientist but rather to the greater sim-

plicity of his task and the palpableness of much of his knowledge. The historian can almost never have any direct personal experience of the phenomena with which he deals. He only knows the facts of the past by the traces they have left. Now these traces are usually only the reports of someone who commonly did not himself have any direct experience of the facts and who did not even take the trouble to tell us where he got his alleged information. This is true of almost all the ancient and mediaeval historians and annalists. So it comes about that "the immense majority of the sources of information which furnish the historian with starting points for his reasoning are nothing else than traces of psychological operations" rather than direct traces of the facts.

To take a single example from among thousands which might be cited, Gibbon tells us that after the death of Alaric in 410 "The ferocious character of the Barbarians was displayed in the funeral of the hero, whose valor and fortune they celebrated with mournful applause. By the labor of a captive multitude they forcibly diverted the course of the Busentinus, a small river that washes the walls of Consentia. The royal sepulchre, adorned with the splendid spoils and trophies of Rome, was constructed in the vacant bed; the waters were then restored to their natural channel, and the secret spot, where the remains of Alaric had been deposited, was for ever concealed by the inhuman massacre of the prisoners who had been employed to execute the work." The basis of this account is the illiterate "History of the Goths" written by an ignorant person, Jordanes, about a hundred and forty years after the occurrence of the supposed events. We know that Jordanes copied freely from a work of his better instructed contemporary, Cassiodorus, which has been lost. This is absolutely all that we know about the sources of our information.

Shall we believe this story which has found its way into so many of our textbooks? Gibbon did not witness the burial of Alaric nor did Jordanes, upon whose tale he greatly improves, nor did Cassiodorus who was not born until some eighty years after the death of the Gothic king. We can control the "psychological operation" represented in Gibbon's text, for he says he got the tale from Jordanes, but aside from our suspicion that Jordanes took the story from the lost book by Cassiodorus we have no means of controlling the various psychological operations which separate the tale as we have it from the real circumstances. We have other reasons than Jordanes' authority for supposing that Alaric is dead, but as for the circumstances of his burial we can only say they may have been as described, but we have only the slightest reason for supposing that they were. The scope for dream logic and the mind's-eye faculty as well as for mistakes and misapprehensions of all kinds is in such cases infinitely greater than when one deals with his own impressions, which can be intensified and corrected by repeated observations and clarified by experiment. As Langlois remarks, the historian is like a chemist who should be forced to rely for his knowledge of a series of experiments upon what his laboratory boy told him.

It should now have become clear that history can never become a science in the sense that physics, chemistry, physiology, or even anthropology, is a science. The complexity of the phenomena is appalling and we have no way of artificially analyzing and of experimenting with our facts. We know absolutely nothing of any occurrences in the history of mankind during thousands of years and it is only since the invention of printing that our sources have become in any sense abundant. Historical students have moreover become keenly aware of the "psychological operations" which separate them from the objective facts of the

past. They know that all narrative sources, upon which former historians so naïvely relied, are open to the gravest suspicion and that even the documents and inscriptions which they prize more highly are nevertheless liable to grave misinterpretation.

But if there is no hope that history can become a science in the sense in which the term is usually accepted, why should it not resign itself to remaining, as it always has been essentially, a branch of literature? Since all departments of knowledge have now become historical, what need is there of history in general? If politics, war, art, law, religion, science, literature, be dealt with genetically, will not history tend inevitably to disintegrate into its organic elements? Professor Seeley of the University of Cambridge believed that it would. Twenty years ago he declared that history was after all but the name of "a residuum which has been left when one group of facts after another has been taken possession of by some science; that residuum which now exists must go the way of the rest, and that time is not very distant when a science will take possession of the facts which are still the undisputed property of the historian."

Now the last question I have to discuss is whether history, after gaining the whole world, is destined to lose her own soul. Let us assume that historical specialization has done its perfect work, that every distinct phase of man's past, every institution, sentiment, conception, discovery, achievement or defeat which is recorded has found its place in the historical treatment of the particular branch of research to which it has been assigned according to the prevailing classification of the sciences. This process of specialization would serve to rectify history in a thousand ways, and to broaden and deepen its operations, but, instead, of destroying it, it would rather tend, on the contrary, to demonstrate with perfect clearness its absolute indispensability. Human affairs and human change do not lend

themselves to an exhaustive treatment through a series of monographs upon the ecclesiastical or military organization of particular societies, their legal procedure, agrarian system, their art, domestic habits or views on higher education. Many vital matters would prove highly recalcitrant when one attempted to force them into a neat scientific cubby-hole. Physical, moral and intellectual phenomena are mysteriously interacting in that process of life and change which it falls to the historian to study and describe.

Man is far more than the sum of his scientifically classifiable operations. Water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, but it is not like either of them. Nothing could be more artificial than the scientific separation of man's religious, aesthetic, economic, political, intellectual and bellicose properties. These may be studied, each by itself, with advantage, but specialization would lead to the most absurd results if there were not someone to study the process as a whole; and that someone is the historian. Imagine the devotees of the various social sciences each engaged in describing his particular interest in the Crusades or the Protestant Revolt or the French Revolution. When they had finished would not the historian have to retell the story in his way, utilizing all that they had accomplished, including what they had all omitted, and rectifying the errors into which each of the specialists had fallen on account of his ignorance of the general situation? The historian will moreover engage in his own kind of specialization. He no longer confines himself to cross sections of the past but traces ideas and institutions morphogenetically—if I may be permitted to borrow that polite term.

As for his ignorance, which I have so frankly revealed, he now recognizes that in all humility, and is making every effort to remedy it by the application of highly scientific methods. He shares it moreover with the representatives of all the social sciences who attempt to carry their work back

into the past. The historian will become more and more interested, I believe, in explaining the immediate present and fortunately his sources for the immediately preceding two or three centuries are infinitely more abundant and satisfactory than for the whole earlier history of the world. He is criticizing and indexing his sources and rendering them available to an extent which would astonish a layman unfamiliar with the tremendous amount that has been accomplished in this way during the past fifty years. Every year adds to our resources here in New York City material that was formerly out of reach of even the most assiduous European scholar. Every year witnesses important additions to our knowledge of our own national history.

WE have now seethed the kid in its mother's milk. We have explained History by means of History. The historian is from a narrow scientific point of view a little higher than a man of letters and a good deal lower than an astronomer or biologist. He need not however repudiate his literary associations, for they are eminently respectable, but he will aspire hereafter to find out not only exactly how things have been but how they have come about. He will remain the critic and guide of the social sciences whose results he must synthesize and test by the actual life of mankind as it appears in the past. His task is so grand and so comprehensive that it will doubtless gradually absorb his whole energies and wean him in time from literature, for no poet or dramatist ever set before himself a nobler or a more inspiring ideal, or one making more demands upon the imagination and resources of expression, than the destiny which is becoming clearer and clearer to the historian.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

A SERIES of twenty-two lectures descriptive in untechnical language of the achievements in Science, Philosophy and Art, and indicating the present status of these subjects as concepts of human knowledge, are being delivered at Columbia University, during the academic year 1907-1908, by various professors chosen to represent the several departments of instruction.

MATHEMATICS, by Cassius Jackson Keyser, *Adrain Professor of Mathematics.*

PHYSICS, by Ernest Fox Nichols, *Professor of Experimental Physics.*

CHEMISTRY, by Charles F. Chandler, *Professor of Chemistry.*

ASTRONOMY, by Harold Jacoby, *Rutherford Professor of Astronomy.*

GEOLOGY, by James Furman Kemp, *Professor of Geology.*

BIOLOGY, by Edmund B. Wilson, *Professor of Zoology.*

PHYSIOLOGY, by Frederic S. Lee, *Professor of Physiology.*

BOTANY, by Herbert Maule Richards, *Professor of Botany.*

ZOOLOGY, by Henry E. Crampton, *Professor of Zoology.*

ANTHROPOLOGY, by Franz Boas, *Professor of Anthropology.*

ARCHAEOLOGY, by James Rignall Wheeler, *Professor of Greek Archaeology and Art.*

HISTORY, by James Harvey Robinson, *Professor of History.*

ECONOMICS, by Henry Rogers Seager, *Professor of Political Economy.*

POLITICS, by Charles A. Beard, *Adjunct Professor of Politics.*

JURISPRUDENCE, by Munroe Smith, *Professor of Roman Law and Comparative Jurisprudence.*

SOCIOLOGY, by Franklin Henry Giddings, *Professor of Sociology.*

PHILOSOPHY, by Nicholas Murray Butler, *President of the University.*

PSYCHOLOGY, by Robert S. Woodworth, *Adjunct Professor of Psychology.*

METAPHYSICS, by Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, *Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy.*

ETHICS, by John Dewey, *Professor of Philosophy.*

PHILOLOGY, by A. V. W. Jackson, *Professor of Indo-Iranian Languages.*

LITERATURE, by Harry Thurston Peck, *Anthon Professor of the Latin Language and Literature.*

These lectures are published by the Columbia University Press separately in pamphlet form, at the uniform price of twenty-five cents, by mail twenty-eight cents. Orders will be taken for the separate pamphlets, or for the whole series.

Address

THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Columbia University, New York

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 018 497 103 3